

## Fridugisus of Tours, On the Being of Nothing and Shadows (Complete)

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<sup>1</sup> There have been several editions of Fridugisus' letter. I have consulted those in Jaques-Paul Migne, *Patrologiae cursus completus ¼ series latina*, 221 vols., (Paris: J.-P. Migne, 1844–1864), vol. 105, cols. 751–756; Francesco Corvino, “Il ‘De nihilo et tenebris’ di Fredegiso di Tours,” *Rivista critica di storia della filosofia* (1956), pp. 273–286; and the most recent and authoritative edition, in Concettina Gennaro, *Fridugiso di Tours e il “De substantia nihili et tenebrarum”*: *Edizione critica e studio introduttivo*, (“Pubblicazioni dell’istituto universitario di magistero di Catania,” serie filosofica — saggi e monografie, no. 46; Padua: Casa editrice Dott. Antonio Milani, 1963). Fridugisus' letter survives in four manuscripts. Nevertheless the text is corrupt in places, and all editors have had to suggest emendations here and there. For my translation I have followed Gennaro's edition, but not always her interpretation. There is another translation, by Hermigild Dressler, in John F. Wippel and Allan Wolter, eds., *Medieval Philosophy from St. Augustine to Nicholas of Cusa*, (New York: The Free Press, 1969), pp. 104–108. Note that references to the Psalms in this translation are given according to the numbering in the *Revised Standard Edition*.



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## On the Being (*Substantia*) of Nothing and Shadows

### On the Being of Nothing

Fridugisus the deacon, to all the faithful of God and of our most fair lord Charles,<sup>2</sup> gathered together at his sacred palace.

5 I diligently turned it over [in my mind] and considered the matter, and at last it seemed right to me to undertake the question about nothing, which has been bandied about by a great many people for a long time, but which they have abandoned without [seriously] discussing or examining it, as if it were impossible to explain. Breaking the powerful bonds in which it  
10 seemed to be tangled up, I have resolved [the question] and untied [the knot]. Dispersing the cloud, I have brought [the matter] back into the light, and have taken care that it be entrusted to the memory of posterity for all ages to come.

Now the question is as follows: Is nothing something or not?

15 If one answers “It seems to me to be nothing,” his very denial, as he supposes it, compels him to say that something is nothing, since he says “*It* seems to me to be nothing,” which is as if he were to say, “It seems to me that nothing is something.” But if it seems to be something, it cannot appear not to be in any way at all. Hence, the only remaining alternative is that it  
20 seems to be something.

But if this is the answer given, “It seems to me to be nothing and not something,”<sup>3</sup> this answer is to be countered first by reasoning, to the extent that human reason allows, and then by authority — not just any [authority], but only by divine [authority], which alone is [truly] an authority and  
25 [which] alone reaches unshakable certitude.

Let us proceed therefore by reason. Every finite name signifies something. For instance, ‘man’, ‘stone’, ‘wood’. As soon as these [words] are said, at the same time we understand the things they signify. Thus, the name ‘man’, uttered without any differentiating [word], designates the uni-  
30 versality of men. ‘Stone’ and ‘wood’ include their generality in the same way. So, if ‘nothing’ is a name at all, as the grammarians claim [it is], it is a

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<sup>2</sup> That is, Charlemagne. Fridugis’ letters was written to him.

<sup>3</sup> The second clause in this formulation is intended to prevent the kind of objection raised to the first answer, in the preceding paragraph. In other words, I take both of these answers to be on the negative side of the question. I therefore agree with Corvino (p. 281, n. 8), and disagree with Gennaro (pp. 124–125, note m), on the proper way to read the first answer.

finite name. But every finite name signifies something. Now it is impossible that this finite something is not anything. It is impossible, therefore, that nothing, which is finite, is not anything. And in this way it can be proved that it exists.

5        Again, ‘nothing’ is a significative word. But every signifying is related to what it signifies. [Hence,] on these grounds too it is proved that nothing is unable not to be anything [at all].

10        Again, another [argument]. Every signifying is a signifying of that which is. But ‘nothing’ signifies something. Therefore, ‘nothing’s signifying is of that which is — that is, of an existing thing.

15        Now because we have provided only a few points from reason to demonstrate that nothing is not only something but even something great, although nevertheless countless such examples could be brought into the discussion, we wish to turn [now] to divine authority, which is the safe-guard and fixed foundation of reason.

20        For indeed the whole divinely instructed Church, which arose from the side of Christ, was raised on the food of his most sacred flesh and the drink of his precious blood, [and] was educated from the cradle in the mysteries of secret things, confesses that it holds with unshakable faith that the divine power produced earth, water, air and fire, along with light and the angels and man’s soul, out of “nothing.”

The edge of the mind, therefore, must be lifted up to the authority of so great a summit, which no reason [can] shake, no arguments [can] refute, no powers can oppose.

25        For this is [the authority] that declares that the things first and foremost among creatures are produced out of nothing. Therefore, nothing is a great and distinguished something. It cannot be assessed how great is that from which so many and so distinguished things come, since not one of the things generated from it can be assessed for what it is worth or be defined.

30        For who has measured the nature of the elements in detail? Who has grasped the being and nature of light, of angelic nature, or of the soul?

35        Therefore, if we are unable to comprehend by human reason these things I [just] mentioned, how shall we [ever] reach [the knowledge of] how great and what kind of thing it is from which they draw their origin and their genus?

I could have added a great many other things. But we think that, from the points [above], enough has [already] penetrated into the breasts of whoever can be taught.

## On the Being of Shadows

Since I have appropriately put an end [to the previous discussion] after saying the [few] brief things [above], I have next turned [my] attention to [other] matters that must be explained, [matters] that have not undeservedly seemed to inquisitive readers [to be] worth asking about.

There is the opinion, then, among some people that shadows do not exist, and that it is impossible that they exist. How easily this [opinion] can be refuted, the prudent reader will recognize from the authority of Sacred Scripture, once it has been brought into the discussion.

So let us see what the story in the book of Genesis thinks about this.

It says, “And the shadows were over the face of the deep” (Gen. 1:2).

If they did not exist, by what inference is it said that they “were” [over the face of the deep]? He who says that shadows “are,” by affirming a thing, posits [it]; but he who [says they] “are not,” by denying the thing, takes [it] away. For example, when we say “Man is” we affirm a thing — namely, man. When we say “Man is not,” by denying the thing — namely, man — we take [it] away. For a substantial verb<sup>4</sup> has it in its nature that, whatever subject it is joined to without a negation, it makes known the being of that subject. Therefore, in saying ‘were’ in the quotation “the shadows were over the face of the deep,” a thing is affirmed that no negation separates or divides from being.

Again, ‘shadows’ is the subject, [and] ‘were’ makes [it] known. For it makes [it] known by declaring that shadows in some way are.

Observe how invincible authority, accompanied by reason, together with reason acknowledging authority, declare the same thing, namely, that shadows exist.

But, although the above points, given for the sake of example, are enough to demonstrate what we claimed, nevertheless in order that there remain no opportunity for enemies to contradict [us], let us bring out into the open a few [other] passages from Scripture, gathering [them] from among the many [possible], [so that,] shaken by the fear of them, [such people] will not dare to hurl their ridiculous words against them any more.

When the Lord punished Egypt with terrible plagues because of [its] oppressing the people of Israel, he enveloped it with shadows so thick they

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<sup>4</sup> A “substantial verb” is a form of the verb ‘to be’ when not used as a copula — that is, when it means “to exist.” Other verbs, which can be resolved into a copula plus a participle (e. g., runs = is + running), are called “adjectival verbs.” The exact metaphysical importance of this distinction is of course subject to discussion. But the terminology itself was standard.

could be felt. Not only did they deprive men's sight of [its] objects, but because of their density, they could even be touched by the hands. Now whatever can be touched and felt must be. Whatever must be, it is impossible for it not to be. And so it is impossible for shadows not to be because it is necessary for [them] to be, as is proved from the fact that it<sup>5</sup> can be felt.

Moreover, the fact is not to be ignored that when the Lord made the division into light and shadows, he called the light "day" and the shadows "night" (Gen. 1:5). For if the name 'day' signifies something, the name 'night' cannot help but signify something. Now 'day' signifies the light, and light is a great something. For the day both is and is something great. What then? Do shadows signify nothing when the name 'night' is imposed on them by the same maker who imposed the title 'day' on the light?<sup>6</sup> Is divine authority to be shaken [in this way]? No indeed! It is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for divine authority to be moved from its station.

The creator stamped names on the things he made, so that each thing would be known when it is called by its name. Neither did he form any thing without its [corresponding] word, nor did he establish any word unless that for which it was established existed. If it were the case [that God had established a word with no corresponding thing, the word] would seem entirely superfluous. And it is wicked to say God has done that. But if it is wicked to say God has established something superfluous, [then] the name God imposed on the shadows cannot appear in any way to be superfluous. But if it is not superfluous, [then] it is in accordance with [some] method. And if it [is] in accordance with a method, it [is] also necessary, since it is needed in order to distinguish the thing signified by it. And so it is certain that God has established things and names, which are necessary for one another, in accordance with a method.

And the holy prophet David, filled with the Holy Spirit and knowing that 'shadows' does not mean something empty and like a wind, plainly expresses [the fact that] they are something. Thus he says, "He sent shadows" (Psalms 105:28). If they do not exist, how are they sent? What is can be sent, and can be sent to where it is not. But what is not cannot be sent anywhere, since it is nowhere. Therefore, the shadows are said to have been sent because they were.

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<sup>5</sup> The text has the singular here, presumably referring to 'whatever can be touched and felt' two sentences earlier. One would have expected a plural, agreeing with 'shadows'.

<sup>6</sup> There seems to be some confusion here about what is signifying what. The point would be clearer, and the parallel with the fact that 'day' signifies the light would be stronger, if the text read: "Are shadows nothing when the name 'night' is imposed on them by the same creator..."

Again, the passage: “He put the shadows as his hiding place” (Psalms 18:11). Of course he put what existed, and he put [it] a certain way, so that he put the shadows, which were his hiding place.<sup>7</sup>

Again, another [passage]: “Like his shadows” (Psalms 139:12). Here  
 5 it is indicated that they are in [his] possession, and therefore it is made plain that they exist. For everything that is possessed exists. But the shadows are in [his] possession. Therefore, they exist.

Although these passages are enough, as many and as great as they are, and offer a secure fortress against all attacks, so that with an easy re-  
 10 buff they can turn missiles back on those who threw them, nevertheless certain passages from the steadfastness of the Gospel should be required [too].

Therefore, let us set down the words of the Savior himself. “The children of the kingdom,” he says, “will be cast forth into the shadows out-  
 15 side” (Matt. 8:12). Now observe that he calls the shadows “outside.” For ‘out’ (*extra*), from which ‘outside’ (*exterius*) is derived, signifies a place. Therefore, when he says “outside,” he is indicating that shadows have loca-  
 20 tions. There would not be shadows “outside” unless there were also [others] “inside.” Now whatever is outside must be in a place; what does not exist is nowhere. Therefore, the shadows outside not only exist but also have loca-  
 tions.

Also, in the Lord’s passion the evangelist declares that shadows were made from the sixth hour of the day until the ninth hour. Since they were made, how can they be said not to exist? What has been made cannot  
 25 be caused not to have been made; rather what does not always exist, and is never made, never exists. But shadows are made. Hence it cannot be brought about that they do not exist.<sup>8</sup>

Again, another [passage]: “If the light that is in you is shadows, how great those shadows will be!” (Matt. 6:23). I believe no one doubts that  
 30 quantity is attributed to bodies, which are divided [from one another] by quantity. And quantity is accidental to bodies. But accidents are either in a subject or predicated of a subject. Therefore, in the quotation ‘how great those shadows will be’, quantity is shown to be in a subject.<sup>9</sup> Hence it is

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<sup>7</sup> The general point of the paragraph is clear enough, but I find the exact sense a little shaky.

<sup>8</sup> Presumably this is not supposed to mean that things that are made cannot be destroyed, but only that what is made exists, and nothing can change that fact.

<sup>9</sup>As it stands, this is of course a blatant *non sequitur*. But the words ‘or at least predicated of a subject’ could be added to the sentence without spoiling the point of the paragraph.

inferred, by a persuasive argument, that shadows not only exist, they are also corporeal.

And so I have taken the trouble to write to Your Dignity and Prudence these few points collected from reason and authority together, so that, adhering fast and immovably to them, no false opinion will be able to seduce you to stray from the path of truth.

But if perhaps something in disagreement with this reasoning of ours should be said by anyone, you will, by having recourse to this [letter] as if to a rule, be able to overthrow foolish contrivances on the basis of its statements.

The end.